

ARTICLE APPEARED
 IN
 CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
 15 January 1985

Military's role in space

As US, Soviet space-weapons programs proceed, negotiators face task of averting arms race in orbit

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Washington

The fallout from the recent US-Soviet session in Geneva indicates a new and difficult period ahead for arms control as both sides accelerate their advanced military space programs.

In terms of negotiating positions, the situation is much the same as it was last summer, when the two sides could not agree on how to link offensive and defensive weapons.

This difference was confronted in Geneva, but papered over in a way that leaves the United States free for now to proceed with President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, or "star wars," as the program is popularly known. The White House and the Pentagon now acknowledge that the purpose of the SDI is to "enhance deterrence" and not protect all of the US from ballistic-missile warheads.

"We know it's not likely to be perfect, but it will give us a better deterrent posture," says Gerold Yonas, chief scientist of the Pentagon's SDI organization.

But the administration is proceeding purposefully with the SDI program, free from such Soviet-sought restraints as a moratorium on the testing of antisatellite

(ASAT) weapons. White House national-security adviser Robert McFarlane said Monday the US would proceed with ASAT testing this spring as planned.

The Pentagon wants to double SDI funds this coming year, to more than \$3 billion. And enthusiasts are promising some interesting technological advances in the near term — in significant if subtle contrast to the impression given by more-public assertions about this being a long-range research program on which the decisions of future presidents will be based.

"Our program is every day proving that ... not only are the technologies needed for strategic defense attainable, many of them are, in fact, already at hand," Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson Jr., head of SDI, said in a speech over the weekend. "In the months to come, we will have many additional significant technical achievements to report to the nation."

In some key areas — such as beaming very powerful lasers into space — other Pentagon officials say that technological problems have been overcome, and they "now have only engineering problems" to deal with.

All of this is heating up the public debate over strategic defense and — more broadly — the militarization of space.

US defense officials say it will happen in any case — that space can no more remain free of military systems than have the oceans or the atmosphere.

"It's inevitable that military operations will be conducted in space, because that is a human activity and all human activities will be conducted in space," Robert Cooper, director of advanced research at the Pentagon, said Saturday at a symposium sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Planetary Society.

"The real issue that's being missed," Dr. Cooper added, is that while attention focuses on strategic defense, the Soviet Union and the US "will be deploying adjunct weapons in space," such as battle-management satellites that provide real-time (near-instantaneous) data.

The Soviets are hustling to catch up with the US shuttle program, which next week will be used to launch a new, high-altitude, signals-intelligence satellite. In September, according to Aviation Week & Space Technology, the Soviets launched their largest-ever military satellite, an intelligence craft designed to intercept radio communications and other data. The satellite passes frequently over the US at an altitude of 530 miles.

Critics of the US "star wars" program and its possible impact on the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (which prohibits even the testing of missile defense components in space) acknowledge that the Soviet Union may also be undermining arms control with its military space efforts.

"We're not the only ones that are the bad guys here," says Abram Chayes of the Harvard Law School. "The Soviets are doing the same thing [as SDI] with other programs. There is a conscious parallelism, and the result is a shredding of the ABM Treaty."

Without acknowledging Soviet complicity in what he called a "most frighten-

ing" growth rate in space military expenditures, Roald Sagdeev, director of the Institute for Cosmic Research of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, said the two countries seem to be "imprisoned together."

General Abrahamson speaks for many strategic-defense supporters when he calls SDI part of "the new space renaissance"

that "will be a positive catalyst vis-à-vis the civilian uses of space."

He predicts "spinoff possibilities" in such areas as computers, communications, propulsion, and lasers that "could help to solve technological problems in related fields" and "help the SDI program pay for itself."

Other experts are far less sanguine about the military future in space.

"I'm not against the militarization of space," Cornell University's Carl Sagan told the weekend symposium. "We have been militarizing space with reconnaissance satellites since the 1960s, and they're worth their weight in gold. It's the introduction of weapons into space that worries me very much."

"Space has become an arena for warfare, a kind of bloodless warfare, a kind of video-arcade warfare that is pure and clean," he said. "You get a very strong sense that this is not only easy but fun."

"We are at a clear branch point — a time at which the same set of technologies that can destroy us can also carry us to the planets and the stars," Dr. Sagan said. He proposes that the US and the Soviet Union instead turn their efforts to a joint space mission to Mars.

At the moment, as the Soviet Union's Dr. Sagdeev acknowledges, there "is no framework for such cooperation." Instead, as the systems being developed and deployed by both sides indicate, the framework continues to be one of military competition in space.